

Two Poets of the Peasantry

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decapitated amid the yells and cat-calls of
the mob;¹⁰
religious houses were stormed; and lawyers
above all
found themselves so hunted down that it
was death in
some places to be seen wearing an ink-
horn. Both then
and when reaction, that summer, covered
the fields of
Kent and Essex with their grim harvest of
gibbets, Lang-
land must have been glad to lie low. A
third and last
time in the nineties, with a more cautious
hand, he revised
his great patchwork quilt. There are signs
now of en-
feeblement; though in a gallant effort to
keep up with the
times the old man equips the defences of the
Devil against
Christ's Harrowing of Hell with 'brasene
gonnes —just
a little less incongruous, perhaps, than those
Malory gives
to Sir Modred in his revolt against King
Arthur, or
Chaucer to Augustus at Actium. But there is
no reference
at all in this final version to the rising of the
poor serfs
who had taken in vain the name of Piers
Plowman in

¹⁰The vocal powers of the rebels seem particularly
to have shaken
the nerves of their betters. Walsingham, the monk
of St. Albans,
gives an amazing account of this scene and the
behaviour of these
'rustici, ribaldi perdirissimi, ganeones daemoniati'—
Piers Plowman
seen from a very different angle. 'Factus est clamor
horrendissimus, non
similis clamoribus quos edere solent homines, sed
qui ultra omnem
aestimationem superaret omnes clamores humanos,
et maxime posset
assimulari ululatibus infernalium incolarum ...
replebantur guttura
mijtisonismugitibus, vel, quod est verius, vocibus pavon

umdiabolicis/

This 'diabolical squalling of peacocks' recalls the even more extraordinary account of the rising by Gower (*Vox Clamantis*, I,3d), which is a curiosity not to be missed. His pen trembles in his hand as he describes the rabble with their hideous names:

Watte vocat, cui Thomme venit, neque Symme retardat,

Bette que Gibbe simul Hykke venire iubent.

They sneeze as fiercely as asses, bellow like bulls, grunt still more

horribly, like swine—'porcorum grunnitus

horridiores*; they bark

like dogs, howl like wolves, roar like lions, buzz like wasps, hiss like

geese. It all recalls some Bolshevik caricature of a quaking bourgeoisie.